

‘The Dearest of Women is Gone’: A Historical Study of Grief in the Life of John Ryland Jr

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In January 1787, John Ryland Jr, pastor of College Lane Baptist Church in Northampton and future pastor of the Broadmead church in Bristol and President of Bristol Baptist Academy, lost his beloved wife, Betsy. While his public ministry continued largely uninterrupted, evidence of his struggle with grief is found in his unpublished poetry, which is kept in the Bristol Baptist College archives. These poems provide insight into how an influential Particular Baptist leader dealt with the loss of a woman whom he called ‘the dearest of women’. In them, Ryland displays a vulnerability that is largely absent from his published writings and gives insight into how his theology interacted with his personal grief during the years after Betsy’s death.

Keywords

Particular Baptist; grief; Ryland; poetry

Introduction

In the archive of Bristol Baptist College, there are two volumes of 165 handwritten poems by John Ryland Jr (1753–1825) between 1779 and 1821. While Ryland was a published poet, his poetry never reached the audience or critical acclaim of his fellow Bristolian, Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Whatever he lacked in renown, Ryland made up for in consistency: from an early age, Ryland was busy at his poems. He published his first book of poetry at age thirteen,¹ and his last published piece of poetry was written during his last illness in 1825.²

Ryland’s early poetry is of a distinctly theological bent.³ This is evidenced by Ryland’s early book of poetry entitled *Serious Essays on the Truths of the Glorious Gospel*, which is complete with Scripture proofs after

¹ John Ryland, *The Plagues of Egypt, by a School-boy Thirteen Years of Age* (London: No Publisher, 1766).

² John Ryland, ‘Lines Written by the Late Dr. Ryland during His Last Illness’, *Baptist Magazine* 17 (July 1825), p. 308.

³ He says of his early poetry, ‘Since that time [his conversion in 1767], my poems have been chiefly on religious subjects, some of which having been seen by several Christian friends, who have signified their approbation of them, and their desire to have a few of them published, which they hoped might be neither disagreeable nor useless to many of the Lord’s people, I was persuaded to consent’ (John Ryland, *Serious Essays on the Truths of the Glorious Gospel, and the Various Branches of Vital Experience. For the Use of True Christians* (London: J.W. Pasham, 1771), p. viii).

many of the stanzas.⁴ While he ceased publishing books of poetry in 1773,⁵ he continued to compose poems along the same theologically motivated lines as before. However, in 1787, the tenor of Ryland's poetry changes, and it becomes more personal. The reason for this is not difficult to discern: Ryland lost his wife, Elizabeth (Betsy), just forty-five days after she gave birth to their first child, a son named John Tyler Ryland. Ryland's reaction to her death has not been examined in depth in any of the recent research into his life and thought. This is likely because of how little it seemed to disturb his public ministry: Betsy died on 23 January 1787, and he was back in the pulpit for the funeral of a child on 2 February.⁶ Thereafter, he resumed his ordinary duties as pastor at College Lane, Northampton.

In the light of this, it would be easy, and perhaps reasonable, to assume that Ryland continued his life largely undisturbed after Betsy's death. However, his private writings reveal a deep and lasting pain. In a letter to Jonathan Edwards Jr, Ryland shows the grief he was enduring. After giving an account of their relationship⁷ as well as Betsy's last weeks, Ryland says, 'Do pray for me! I can pray but seldom with a degree of proper feeling.'⁸ Ryland also divulged his heart to his frequent counsellors, John Newton and Robert Hall Sr.⁹

It is in the two volumes of poetry, however, that one finds a lengthy, unguarded look into the broken spirit of a man grieving the loss of his wife. It is worth examining because it provides a deeper, fuller picture of who Ryland was as a husband and man. He appears in the poems less as a churchman, pastor, and denominational leader, and more as an ordinary, struggling man, whose theology served both to wound and soothe his soul.

John Ryland and Elizabeth Tyler

Ryland had longed to marry. He says in his 'Autograph Reminiscences' that he first began to think of marrying in 1775.¹⁰ As he did not marry Betsy until

⁴ John Ryland, *Serious Essays*, passim.

⁵ John Ryland, *The Faithfulness of God in His Word Evinced* (London: J.W. Pasham, 1773).

⁶ John Ryland, 'Text Book', 2 February 1787, Northamptonshire Record Office. Ryland marked the occasion of Betsy's death with a black bar drawn on the date.

⁷ Speaking of their married life together, he says, 'I lived wth her 7 years. They were 7 years of sore trials in some respects, from another quarter, but she was a blessed comfort to me under them. Few young women ever equall'd her in prudence & evry amiable disposition. She had a great degree of domestic œconomy, join'd with much benevolence to the poor' (Ryland, 'Letter to Jonathan Edwards Jr', 29 June 1787, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University). Ryland's description of their relationship to Edwards Jr is very much in keeping with what is found in the poems.

⁸ Ryland, 'Letter to Jonathan Edwards Jr', 29 June 1787.

⁹ The letters to Newton and Hall have been lost, but letters from them yet remain and demonstrate that Ryland was open with them about his grief. A letter from Hall is held at the Bristol Baptist College Archives, and the letters from Newton were published in Grant Gordon, ed., *Wise Counsel: John Newton's Letters to John Ryland Jr*. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2009).

¹⁰ Ryland, 'Autograph Reminiscences', Bristol Baptist College Archives, 53.

1780, that meant five years of waiting. Ryland mentions two young ladies with whom he attempted courtships, both of which came to naught. These disappointments were apparently quite sore for Ryland at the time. He wrote to Newton about his struggles, and Newton responded with compassionate yet firm counsel. As Ryland was seemingly growing impatient with the process of finding a wife, Newton advises him, saying, ‘Worldly people expect their schemes to run upon all-fours.’¹¹ He encourages Ryland to trust God to provide for him at the right time:

if he sees the marriage state best for you, he has the proper person already in his eye; and though she were in Peru or Nova-Zembla, he knows how to bring you together. In the mean time, go thou and preach the Gospel.¹²

Ryland obeyed the counsel of his mentor and continued his ministry, but his desire to marry did not abate.

So it was, in December 1776, that Ryland began to court Elizabeth Tyler.¹³ She was born on 1 December 1758 to Robert and Elizabeth Tyler of Banbury.¹⁴ Her parents probably died before she came of age, as Newton mentions her being under guardians while at school.¹⁵ While at school, she became a member of College Lane Baptist Church, where Ryland was the co-pastor along with his father.¹⁶ It was in this context that they likely would have first met, though their courting began after she had moved away to

¹¹ John Newton, ‘Letter to John Ryland Jr’, 6 July 1776, in Gordon, *Wise Counsel*, p. 92.

¹² Newton, ‘Letter to Ryland’, 6 July 1776, in Gordon, *Wise Counsel*, p. 92. ‘Nova-Zembla’ is most likely Novaya Zemlya, a large and sparsely inhabited island north of Russia that divides the Barents and Kara seas. In the same letter, Newton tells Ryland, ‘You were sent into the world for a nobler end than to be pinned to a girl’s apron-string’ (Newton, ‘Letter to Ryland’, 6 July 1776, in Gordon, *Wise Counsel*, p. 92). In a later letter, he tries to help Ryland see the positive side of a recent relationship disappointment: ‘Indeed the one circumstance you mention makes me more ready to call it an escape than a disappointment’ (John Newton, ‘Letter to John Ryland Jr’, 20 December 1776, in Gordon, *Wise Counsel*, p. 99). These are all indicative of Newton’s letters to Ryland during this time.

¹³ The timing of the beginning of the courtship is revealed by Ryland in a note on a hymn he composed on 31 December 1776. Ryland writes, ‘This was made at Bradwin, when I first went over to see Miß Betsy Tyler, whom I married 3 y^{rs}. afterward, & who was Mother to John Tyler Ryland’ (John Ryland, ‘A Selection of Hymns Composed by J Ryland Jnr. Between 1773 and 1778’, Bristol Baptist College Archives, 83). A letter from Newton to Ryland on 7 February 1777 about a new prospective wife aligns with this date.

¹⁴ Anon., England and Wales, Non-Conformist and Non-Parochial Registers, 1567-1970, National Archives of the United Kingdom, 80. Her birth record is lost, but her birthdate can be extrapolated from data within the two books of poems. She died on 23 January 1787, and Ryland says that she was aged twenty-eight at the time of her death (John Ryland, ‘Poems by John Ryland Junr’, Vol. 2 (1783-1795), Bristol Baptist College Archives, 67). Elsewhere, Ryland writes two poems on Betsy’s birthday, which he notes was 1 December. If she was twenty-eight at her death on 23 January 1787, and her birthday was 1 December, then her birth date must be 1 December 1758.

¹⁵ John Newton, ‘Letter to John Ryland Jr’, 7 February 1777, in Gordon, *Wise Counsel*, p. 103.

¹⁶ Betsy joined the church at College Lane on 8 April 1774 (Anon., ‘College Lane Baptist Church: Church Book, 1737-1781’, Northamptonshire Record Office, 185). She was, at the time, a student at Mrs. Trinder’s school for girls (Ryland, ‘Letter to Jonathan Edwards Jr’, 29 June 1787, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University). For more information on Martha Trinder and her school, see Karen E. Smith, “‘Female Education’ among Baptists in the Eighteenth Century: Martha (Smith) Trinder (1736–1790) and Henrietta Neale (1752–1802)”, *Baptist Quarterly* 48.4 (2017), 172-76.

Bradwin.¹⁷ The courtship process took three years, and John Ryland Jr and Elizabeth Tyler were finally married on 12 January 1780.¹⁸

On 9 December 1786, Betsy gave birth to John Tyler Ryland. Ryland's joy at the birth of his first son compelled him to take up his pen and write a poem to his son:

My dear little boy
Shall I sit down & try
To make you some verses to learn
That I may please you
And as it is due
Teach you to please me in return.¹⁹

A Pastor's Struggle at the Death of an Affectionate Wife

The boy was healthy, but Betsy's health was precarious. Ryland describes her last weeks to Edwards Jr. After a 'painful lingering labor', Betsy was 'seized with most violent convulsions'.²⁰ Those around her observed 'many tokens of a consumptive nature' in Betsy, and she seems to have slowly declined until she finally passed. Ryland describes her death: 'She died very sweetly! I never saw anybody die beside. I had hold of her hand all the while. God took away all her fears. Tho she was of a very nervous, timid constitution.'²¹

Ryland's first poem after Betsy's death begins with an introduction, stating that it is meant as the 'prayer of a poor solitary Father for his poor little orphan Boy, design'd at the same time as a memorial of the dearest of all the human race, my precious affectionate Wife, who joined the spirits of the just made perfect Jan. 23. 1787'.²² The language of the poem is that of loss and sorrow mixed with hope and reassurance. Ryland writes of his infant son:

This poor little motherless boy
That lies in my bosom asleep,
From all that w^d. hurt or destroy
I pray the Redeemer to keep.²³

¹⁷ See footnote 13. Bradwin is now known as Bradden.

¹⁸ Anon., Northamptonshire, England, Church of England Marriages, 1754-1912, Northamptonshire Record Office, 8; cf. Ryland, 'Text Book', 12 January 1780, Northamptonshire Record Office.

¹⁹ Ryland, 'Poems', Vol. 2, 49. His happiness may also be seen in the birth register entry for John Tyler. It is written in Ryland's handwriting, and it takes up noticeably more space than the others on the same page. He includes more information about the family and signs it with a flourish not seen in his other signatures on the page. In a sad coincidence, the facing page, the death registry, contains the entry for Betsy (Anon., England and Wales, Non-Conformist and Non-Parochial Registers, 1567-1970, National Archives of the United Kingdom, 80).

²⁰ Ryland, 'Letter to Jonathan Edwards Jr', 29 June 1787.

²¹ Ryland, 'Letter to Jonathan Edwards Jr', 29 June 1787.

²² Ryland, 'Poems', Vol. 2, 51.

²³ Ryland, 'Poems', Vol. 2, 51.

Of Betsy, Ryland is both despondent and hopeful:

The dearest of Women is gone
Who bore him with sorrow & pain;
I'm left to feel trouble alone;
She never shall sorrow again.

She's gone, but her infant remains;
Sweet pledge of connection so sweet!
Her God her poor husband sustains,
Nor will he her infant forget.²⁴

He writes about Betsy's prayers for her new son while she yet lived and how she 'gave up her babe to her God'.²⁵ He pictures her in her dying as resigned to the will of God: lying in the arms of her Lord, filled with peace and serenity, silently sinking into rest. Around her deathbed, her loved ones, Ryland in particular, hid their emotions and kept her from seeing their struggles:

Our pafsions we strove to withhold;
But often by stealth drop'd a tear.²⁶

In death she is largely idealised, portrayed as free from all the troubles that this world affords: she feels no anxiety and her soul 'is all rapture on high'.²⁷ It is interesting to note that the hope found in this early poem is hope for Betsy, not necessarily for Ryland himself. He speaks of 'her joy'²⁸ and 'her blifs'.²⁹ For himself, Ryland seems to see darkness with only a little light ahead. He writes:

O how cou'd I pofsibly part
So long & so tenderly ty'd?
Ten years to the choice of my ♥,
Full sev'n to my loveliest bride!³⁰

Herein is seen the theological struggle in the poems. Ryland's theology was thoroughly Calvinistic in terms of how he understood the sovereignty of God. At his ordination, he produced a confession of his faith in which he states that he believes that God not only has 'Foreknowledge from Eternity of all Events', but that nothing can 'alter the most perfect and determinate plan laid down in his decrees who worketh all Things according to the Counsel of his own Will'.³¹ There is nothing that is exempt from these

²⁴ Ryland, 'Poems', Vol. 2, 51.

²⁵ Ryland, 'Poems', Vol. 2, 52.

²⁶ Ryland, 'Poems', Vol. 2, 53.

²⁷ Ryland, 'Poems', Vol. 2, 52.

²⁸ Ryland, 'Poems', Vol. 2, 53.

²⁹ Ryland, 'Poems', Vol. 2, 54.

³⁰ Ryland, 'Poems', Vol. 2, 54.

³¹ Ryland, 'Confession of Faith', 7.

decrees, and, according to Ryland, ‘nothing was left out of his original Purpose’.³²

Ryland did not drop his understanding of sovereignty when Betsy passed away. He could speak of death being ‘at her Savior’s command’, and that he could not withstand the pleasure of the Lord to call her.³³ However, he dared not say that he felt no pain at the blow. It was a lasting wound, and it was inflicted by the Lord whom he loved. This struggle between owning his pain and knowing it came from the Lord would continue for years, and it is seen most acutely in Ryland’s lack of personal engagement with the doctrines he held and preached. That is, for some time after Betsy’s death, in his poetry if not his preaching, when Ryland speaks of theological truth it is generally depersonalised. In this poem, Ryland’s only ‘engagement’ with God is a prayer in the last stanza:

Now Lord be my God & my Guide,
My friend & companion alone!
And for my dear Infant provide,
And seal his young ♥ for thy own.³⁴

A couple of weeks after that poem was penned, John Tyler fell ill. He was not given much hope of recovery, and Ryland once again took up his pen. Again, his theological struggle comes to the fore, as he begins the poem with a question for God:

Dear dying pledge of my own Betsy’s Love,
Part of myself, as part of her more dear;
Will Heav’ns great Lord all earthly Joy remove?
And mult his Wisdom leave me nothing here?

He takes away & who can then withhold?
Who shall presume to ask him ‘What dost thou?’
Almighty pow’r can never be control’d;
To perfect rectitude all ought to bow.³⁵

He believes that God can heal his son if He will, writing that ‘one kind volition wou’d O Lord suffice’.³⁶ However, he will not deny the sting of hearing his son’s cries, hide his parental anguish, or pretend that he is at ease with the prospect of losing his son so soon after the death of his wife. He openly prays for his son’s recovery, but he also soothes his own worries with the hope his son would have of heaven. Ryland’s understanding of the

³² Ryland, ‘Confession of Faith’, 7. This was his settled theological position. Many years later, he would write something similar, saying that God, “‘who worketh all things after the counsel of his own will’”, cannot be defeated in the execution of his gracious purposes, or disappointed of his desired end’ (Ryland, ‘Certain Increase of the Kingdom and Glory of Jesus’, 22).

³³ Ryland, ‘Poems’, Vol. 2, 54.

³⁴ Ryland, ‘Poems’, Vol. 2, 54.

³⁵ Ryland, ‘Poems’, Vol. 2, 55.

³⁶ Ryland, ‘Poems’, Vol. 2, 55.

afterlife of infants dying in infancy is somewhat difficult to discern,³⁷ but he holds out hope that his infant son, were he to die, would be with God in heaven. He even offers a prayer that somehow Betsy might instruct John Tyler before his death:

Perhaps that dear maternal spirit may
 Receive commission to instruct her son;
 Unknown ideas to his mind convey
 By modes to mortals here entomb'd unknown.³⁸

A Hopeful Heavenward Gaze

The prospect of his son's death gave Ryland cause to look to his own death, when, he says, he will be reunited with Betsy:

Which ever first shall his dear Mother meet
 Or he, or I, Oh bring us there at last
 Where each our crowns before the Saviors feet
 In holy extacy shall gladly cast.

Mother & Father & their only Son
 In the sweet heavnly contest shall agree
 Disputing then this single point alone

³⁷ The correspondence with Newton includes discussion regarding the subject, with Newton taking the position that infants dying in infancy are received into heaven by the blood of Christ (John Newton, 'Letter to John Ryland Jr', 14 May 1799, in Gordon, *Wise Counsel*, p. 353). At times, Ryland would seem to disagree with Newton, or at least not possess Newton's surety, as he writes in one poem, dated December 1795:

If ere he taste of earthly Woe
 Or actually can sin,
 Thou shou'dst eternal Life bestow,
 And bid his heavn begin (Ryland, 'Poems', Vol. 2, 122).

An earlier poem, written in March 1787, when he thought that John Tyler might die, is more positive about the destiny of infants:

Speak but the word & my dear babe shall live;
 Pain & disease shall both thy will obey;
 Or to thyself his spirit Lord receive,
 To dwell with thee in everlasting day (Ryland, 'Poems', Vol. 2, 55).

Later, Ryland seems to fully adopt Newton's position, as, in August 1813, he writes to John Tyler to console him on the loss of his daughter, Sophia Elizabeth Ryland, who lived but one day:

Better for your Babe to go,
 Where all his Glory see,
 Than, in realms of sin & woe,
 A pilgrim long to be.

One short day her journey ends,
 One day she has to moan,
 Then her blood-bought soul ascends,

To stand before the throne (John Ryland, 'Poems by John Ryland Junr', Vol. 1 (1778-1821), Bristol Baptist College Archives, 10-11).

³⁸ Ryland, 'Poems', Vol. 2, 56. This is definitely an unusual request by Ryland, as it would require God giving Betsy renewed access to earthly life to communicate with the infant John Tyler Ryland. This is perhaps some evidence of the depth of Ryland's pain at this point.

Which was the deepest Lord in debt to Thee.³⁹

In Ryland's earlier poetry, he focuses on the service he can offer Christ in this life. For example, in a hymn he wrote to Betsy during their courtship, Ryland writes:

Lord & is this blessing ours?
Thee we'd praise with all our powrs.
We are thine, thou are our choice,
All our souls in thee rejoice.⁴⁰

His spirituality in the earlier hymn is a present, earthly spirituality. The spirituality of the poem is much more future- and heaven- oriented. Ryland's gaze is turned away from this world and its vale of sorrows and tears and to heaven.

The next poem Ryland records in this volume is a musing on Psalm 88.18, which reads, 'You have caused my beloved and my friend to shun me; my companions have become darkness.' In light of this psalm, Ryland owns that it is the Lord who has taken Betsy from him:

Lover & friend, O Lord, has thou
Put far away from me;
My best acquaintance here below
I never more shall see.⁴¹

Ryland speaks of God's ability to meet every need of His people: 'ev'ry lofs thou canst supply'.⁴² Ryland believes this to be true, at least, theoretically. His own experience, however, is that his losses have not been supplied. They are, rather, laid heavy upon him:

Bereav'd & desolate I am,
And heavily opprest.⁴³

He goes on to say that he still trusts in 'thy Name', and he looks to the Lord for refuge and rest, but it is worthwhile to note that these are hopeful attainments for Ryland rather than present possessions. His theology tells him that God can assuage every grief and meet every need, but his experience is telling him that that has not happened for him. All he is left with is this poetic prayer, asking God to conduct him to the 'fountain head', in which 'all are fill'd above'. He identifies this fountain head as the place where those around us 'never for a moment dread the ebbing of thy Love'.⁴⁴ This would

³⁹ Ryland, 'Poems', Vol. 2, 58.

⁴⁰ John Ryland, 'A Selection of Hymns Composed by J Ryland Jnr. Between 1773 and 1778', Bristol Baptist College Archives, 87.

⁴¹ Ryland, 'Poems', Vol. 2, 59.

⁴² Ryland, 'Poems', Vol. 2, 59.

⁴³ Ryland, 'Poems', Vol. 2, 59.

⁴⁴ Ryland, 'Poems', Vol. 2, 59.

indicate that Ryland was not at that time free of such dread. The loss of Betsy, understood in light of God's sovereign rule over all events, was not necessarily a loss of faith for Ryland; it was, however, a crisis of confidence in his own experience of God's love.

The next poem is to John Tyler on 27 November 1787, twelve days before his birthday. Apparently, Betsy began her labour on this day twelve months previously.⁴⁵ The poem itself is chiefly a remembrance of Betsy for John. He describes her face as a place 'where lilies mix'd with roses grew', and he points out that Betsy had a strawberry birthmark beneath her eye.⁴⁶ Again, Betsy is idealised as a perfect specimen of a saint. Her mind was so beautiful that he lacks the poetic ability to describe it. Every grace was combined in her, 'the lovely Saint'.⁴⁷ Ryland's purpose in the poems seems to be to assure John Tyler of his mother's character and love. While she and John Tyler were both alive, 'her spirit staid and hover'd o'er her Son', praying for both him and his father.⁴⁸ He points John Tyler to the hope of resurrection, in which 'Mamma shall rise again...when death itself is slain', for it is in that place that they will all be together again.⁴⁹

Ryland next addresses Betsy's death in a poem on what would have been her twenty-ninth birthday. Ryland favours the juxtaposition between himself and Betsy, which is seen in other poems but is especially clear in this one. He speaks of his loneliness and portrays himself as a 'weary pilgrim' creeping through a thorny maze, while Betsy enjoys heavenly bliss:

She needs not creatures to augment her blifs,
From God himself her living comforts flow:
And evil cannot enter where she is,
Nor terror nor temptation reach her now.⁵⁰

He looks again to the return of Christ and the resurrection of the just. However, his hope in this case is focused on Betsy's rise:

Her slumbering clay that joyful trump shall hear,
And in immortal youth & beauty rise;
The likenefs of her blessed Savior wear,
And dwell forever with him in the skies.⁵¹

Heaven is portrayed in this poem less as the place of God's dwelling and more as the house of departed loved ones. Ryland speaks more of friends and

⁴⁵ Ryland makes reference to this:

How soon are XII months fled,
Since your dear Mother's pangs came on? (Ryland, 'Poems', Vol. 2, 60)

⁴⁶ Whether it was shaped or coloured like a strawberry is unknown.

⁴⁷ Ryland, 'Poems', Vol. 2, 60.

⁴⁸ Ryland, 'Poems', Vol. 2, 60.

⁴⁹ Ryland, 'Poems', Vol. 2, 61.

⁵⁰ Ryland, 'Poems', Vol. 2, 62.

⁵¹ Ryland, 'Poems', Vol. 2, 63.

people whom he admired being in heaven with Betsy than he does anything else. These include friends such as David Evans of Thorn, Hannah Payen Law, and Mary Vaughan, as well as theologians and ministers whom Ryland admired, such as James Hervey, Joseph Bellamy, Jonathan Edwards, David Brainerd, John Owen, Stephen Charnock, Joseph Alleine, and John Maclaurin.⁵² Ryland's attention in this poem is focused almost exclusively on the people with whom he expects to have communion in heaven, whether he knew them personally or through their writings. Evans is 'clad in light divine', Law and Vaughan shine with Betsy, Bellamy (who 'plac'd 'true Religion' in a clearer Light') is also portrayed as shining bright, and Alleine glows with 'celestial Fire'.⁵³

Ryland's expectation for himself is largely limited to meeting Betsy and being introduced by her to people whom he has admired.⁵⁴ Indeed, it is the 'sweet hope' of being with them that sustains what he calls his 'burden'd mind'.⁵⁵ As he closes the poem, Ryland's mind wanders back to his beloved Betsy:

My soul's best half is now already there,
And there, her God, my All, for ever reigns.⁵⁶

Anticipating heaven as a place of reunion with departed loved ones is, in many ways, an extension of Ryland's understanding of the church catholic. Ryland's catholicity was well-known in his day,⁵⁷ and it extended beyond the bounds of earthly life. Ryland believed in the church militant and the church triumphant, and the death of a saint meant the dismissal from the former into the latter.⁵⁸ He writes of the state of believers after death,

The S^{ts}. are X^{ts}. Friends as well as ours, & we muft allow him to have his blessed Will (Joh. xvii. 24.) to have his friends about him, as well as we have had them so long; and it may be, before X^t. has had them so long with him, as some of us have had them here below, we fhall be with them again, and Christ, and they, and we

⁵² Ryland, 'Poems', Vol. 2, 64-66.

⁵³ Ryland, 'Poems', Vol. 2, 64-65.

⁵⁴ He does mention anticipating having his 'last Abode' with Christ, but this is limited to one line amidst the many stanzas related to seeing the others (Ryland, 'Poems', Vol. 2, 66).

⁵⁵ Ryland, 'Poems', Vol. 2, 66.

⁵⁶ Ryland, 'Poems', Vol. 2, 62-66.

⁵⁷ In the funeral sermon for Ryland, Robert Hall Jr comments on his departed friend's broad friendships, saying, 'Though a Calvinist, in the strictest sense of the word, and attached to its peculiarities in a higher degree than most of the advocates of that system, he extended his affection to all who bore the image of Christ, and was ingenious in discovering reasons for thinking well of many who widely dissented from his religious views. No man was more remarkable for combining a zealous attachment to his own principles with the utmost liberality of mind towards those who differed from him; an abhorrence of error, with the kindest feelings towards the erroneous. He detested the spirit of monopoly in religion, and opposed every tendency to circumscribe it by the limits of party' (Hall, 'A Sermon', 398).

⁵⁸ Preaching the funeral for a Mrs. A. Tozer in 1820, he begins, 'You are generally aware that God has lately removed from the Ch. militant to the Ch. triumph'. a very excell^t. Person, who has had Communion wth. this Xⁿ Society ab^t. 25 yrs' (Ryland, 'Sermon Notes: 2 Samuel 23:5', Original Manuscript Sermons: Old Testament, Vol. I, Bristol Baptist College Archives).

shall be all together! O what a happy Meeting! They & we freed of all natural & sinful Infirmities. There the Communion of S^{ts}. is in perfection, & this blessed Society shall never break up or separate. No parting Salutation there. The word Farewell is no part of the heavenly Language.”⁵⁹

The idea of reunion with Betsy, coupled with his understanding of heaven as a reunion of believing friends, returns in the next poem in which he references Betsy and which was written on their wedding anniversary.⁶⁰ Ryland begins in a solemn tone:

Once happy day! but ah how gloomy now,
When recollection fills my breast wth. Woe!⁶¹

The poem fits well with the previous poems directed to or about Betsy. He speaks repeatedly of her present joy and her advantage in death.⁶² He also recognises the role that God played in her death:

Scarse was it past, when soon a voice divine
Said “come up hither” & my Love obey’d:⁶³

What makes this particular poem unique is Ryland’s emphasis on his present relationship to Betsy and its future prospect.⁶⁴ While the hope of their reunion is found elsewhere, in poems both before and after this, the way in which Ryland expresses himself is unusual. He speaks of the ‘string wth. w^{ch}. our ♥s were closely ty’d’ being presently broken by her death,⁶⁵ but he goes on to write of another that ‘Death cou’d not divide’, which is now ‘stretch’d

⁵⁹ Ryland, ‘Sermon Notes: 2 Samuel 23:5’, Original Manuscript Sermons: Old Testament, Vol. I, Bristol Baptist College Archives.

⁶⁰ Between this poem and the last Ryland inserts a draft of the epitaph he had written for Betsy, whom he calls ‘the dearest of all Women’ (Ryland, ‘Poems’, Vol. 2, 67). It begins: ‘ELIZABETH RYLAND, the eldest Daughter of Rob. & Eliz. Tyler, & for seven years the affectionate & beloved Wife of John Ryland jun^r. enter into the Joy of her Lord Jan. 23. 1787. Aged 28. Years’ (Ryland, ‘Poems’, Vol. 2, 67). Ryland includes several drafts and additions to the epitaph, with the following the seemingly final version:

The Tomb a while detains her Clay
But Vict’ry crown’d her dying Day
Death’s pointless Dart her Savior broke
She smil’d to feel its harmless stroke
Which had no power to destroy
Her blood-bought soul, her heavn-born joy (Ryland, ‘Poems’, Vol. 2, 67).

⁶¹ Ryland, ‘Poems’, Vol. 2, 69.

⁶² She is ‘breath divine’ and ‘immortal – no, she cou’d not die’ (Ryland, ‘Poems’, Vol. 2, 70).

⁶³ Ryland, ‘Poems’, Vol. 2, 69.

⁶⁴ This poem is also noteworthy for containing one of the few references to words that Betsy herself spoke. It is not known when she spoke these words, but it seems from the context that it was during her last illness:

We ‘are the Babies’ – true, my Betsy, true –
Those words mysterious now I understand;
We shall not reach full age till we, with you,
Are safe translated to Immanuel’s Land (Ryland, ‘Poems’, Vol. 2, 72).

On the facing page, Ryland inserts a poetic note meant to elaborate on the second line:

Was it thy spirit from the realms of joy
That to explain thy dying language came?
Or did thy God more common means employ
To form so pleasant & so true a dream?

⁶⁵ He says that is it ‘broke, & bleeds – I feel it throb with pain’ (Ryland, ‘Poems’, Vol. 2, 70).

to heav'n', and which 'must & will remain'.⁶⁶ This unbroken string that binds them together is 'sacred Love far stronger than before' that 'bind her to Jesus, & to all his friends'. At first glance, it would seem as though Ryland is merely resting here on the connection that all saints have in Christ,⁶⁷ but he goes on to speak of the peculiar reunion and joy that he and Betsy would share. He understands their bond to be unique and unbroken by death. She is his 'Soul's best friend', with whom no other earthly friendship could compare, of whom he could say that not even his own body was even half as dear.⁶⁸ He writes:

But we if met in heav'n, must sure enjoy
A special pleasure in other's bliss;
That World will sinful Selfishness destroy,
But not obliterate th' Events of this.⁶⁹

While in that place 'from sensual pafsions are the saints refin'd', and while he would have stipulated in his wedding vows that his bond to Betsy was to be broken at death,⁷⁰ Ryland believes, nevertheless, that his bond with Betsy continued after her death and would be resumed, though in a different form, at his. His thinking seems to run thus: if death does not break the bonds of friendship, then surely it does not destroy the much deeper bond that he and Betsy shared.

The Darkness Begins to Lift

The first poem that Ryland wrote after Betsy's death that did not have to do with either Betsy or John was not written until over a year after her death. On 26 February 1788, Ryland composed a poem that begins a series of aspirational poems written during the next few months that show him coming to grips with his grief. While it is not the purpose of this article to provide a psychological diagnosis of Ryland, it is not too much to say that these poems show Ryland to be in the midst of a spiritual desert from which he is seeking

⁶⁶ Ryland, 'Poems', Vol. 2, 70.

⁶⁷ To be fair, he does reference this common element of Christian union in Christ. He speaks in the poem of Noah hearing about Betsy's life with admiration and the new converts of Greenland rejoicing to converse with the Britons who are there (Ryland, 'Poems', Vol. 2, 70). That is not Ryland's focus in the poem, however.

⁶⁸ Ryland, 'Poems', Vol. 2, 71.

⁶⁹ Ryland, 'Poems', Vol. 2, 70.

⁷⁰ When writing to his oldest son, John Tyler, before his own wedding day, Ryland emphasizes that aspect of the vows, writing in a poetic prayer:

Protect his journey, Lord, to night,
And let tomorrow's welcome light
Pleasure before unknown impart;
Fill both their ♥s with fober bliss,
Remembering, while they meet & kiss,
That folemn Clause, "Till death fhall part" (Ryland, 'Poems', Vol. 1, 120).

rescue.⁷¹ The 26 February poem is relatively short and simple, a prayer for conformity to the likeness of Christ.⁷² The next poem was written several days later and is based on John 15.5, on which he preached the next day at College Lane in the morning.⁷³ In it, Ryland focuses on his sinfulness and need of Christ to override his passions and wickedness. He writes:

My ♥ is bad, deprav'd my Will,
My pafsions oft my reason blind;
I am perversly prone to Ill,
To Good I'm strangely disinclin'd.

I am all Badness, but thy Grace
My only Remedy I own;
Lord from my mind the darkness chase
And from my will remove the stone.⁷⁴

Ryland's next entry in the poem book is dated 2 March 1788. Like the previous poems in this series, it is based on a text of Scripture from which he was to preach. In this case, it is Philippians 4.13, on which he preached that same day in the afternoon at College Lane. It is a curious poem. He dwells on Paul's claim that he can do all things through Christ. Much of the poem is depersonalised. Paul could claim that he could do all things through Christ, and even 'The Christian Soldier'⁷⁵ could claim this. Of himself, however, Ryland only says:

If I my weakness better knew
And liv'd on Christ alone
I in his strength cou'd all things do
Paul cou'd not in his own.⁷⁶

Ryland seems to see himself as a poor follower of Christ, subsisting on his own strength and not that of Christ. While some of his expression here may

⁷¹ Indeed, in the previous months he had described himself as in a 'dreary, desart Land' and praying for God to 'refresh & cheer' his soul (Ryland, 'Poems', Vol. 2, 59). The poems from this period demonstrate that he had not yet received a positive answer to that prayer.

⁷² Ryland, 'Poems', Vol. 2, 73:

Sure it is my chief desire
In thy likenefs Lord to grow;
I wou'd constantly aspire
More of Jesus Christ to know;
So to know thee, as to be
Thoro'ly conform'd to thee.

⁷³ See Ryland, 'Text Book', 2 March 1788, Northamptonshire Record Office.

⁷⁴ Ryland, 'Poems', Vol. 2, 74. There is another dated 1 March 1788. It is based on 1 John 2.6, on which he preached the next day in the evening. It is less focused on sinfulness, but it is still aspirational. He is still striving for something he does not seem to possess. Ryland was clearly struggling spiritually at this time, with his state of mind described by Newton as a 'thralldom' (John Newton, 'Letter to John Ryland Jr', 30 April 1788, in Gordon, *Wise Counsel*, p. 205).

⁷⁵ Ryland, 'Poems', Vol. 2, 76.

⁷⁶ Ryland, 'Poems', Vol. 2, 76.

be accounted for by his theological commitments,⁷⁷ when placed in the context of the other poems written around the same time it shows that Ryland, while still holding on to Christ in faith, could not claim to be walking in any sort of joy or peace of soul. His faith was a hopeful faith, in the sense that he hoped one day to experience in his own life what he held to in faith.

The good news for the sympathetic reader of Ryland's poetry is that the next poem shows that the light was beginning once again to dawn for him. The poem is dated 5 April 1788, and it is based on 2 Chronicles 20.11-12, on which he preached on 27 April in the morning. It is the first where he speaks positively of himself and his spirituality. He says:

Legions of Sins & Care & Fears
My feeble Soul invade
But when my blessed Lord appears
His presence brings me aid.⁷⁸

It is a small stanza, but it speaks volumes in light of the struggles that have been evident in the poems since Betsy's death. He is still 'feeble', but the Lord has begun to bring Him aid by His presence, something he seems not to have enjoyed much in his recent past. The next poem continues this theme of recovery. It is dated 3 June 1788, and it is based on Galatians 3.4 and was later published in the *Evangelical Magazine*.⁷⁹ He seems to be gaining perspective on his grief. He speaks of sharing in the sufferings of Jesus and the purpose of suffering:

Of trials I meet by the way
I wou'd not presume to complain
But grant blessed Savior I may
Not suffer so often in vain.⁸⁰

The poem demonstrates an understanding of his suffering that is missing in prior poems. He is still not where he would like to be,⁸¹ but the darkness seems to be lifting from his life. Indeed, the next poem reintroduces levity into Ryland's poetry. It is written to John Tyler and is, by Ryland's own admission, a bit silly:

⁷⁷ Ryland believed that human beings are wholly sinful. In the last piece he wrote for publication before he died, he writes of our 'sinful and miserable condition', the presence of war as proof of 'human depravity', and God's abiding treatment of the human race as guilty (Ryland, 'On the Alleged Impiety of Calvinism', 278).

⁷⁸ Ryland, 'Poems', Vol. 2, 77.

⁷⁹ This poem was published under the pen name "R." as 'On Galatians, iii. 4', *Evangelical Magazine* (1795), 554. This poem is also unique in this time period in that it was not based on a passage on which he was soon to preach. He preached from Galatians 3.4 on 31 August 1788, which was almost two months later.

⁸⁰ Ryland, 'Poems', Vol. 2, 78.

⁸¹ He writes:

I long to be wholly thy own
Let Sin & let Self be subdued
Then Lord it shall clearly be shown
My Trials are working for good (Ryland, 'Poems', Vol. 2, 78).

If the verse is but lame
 It may still wear the name
 As I only address it to you
 Papa sure may chat
 About this or that
 And good sense or nonsense will do

I soon shall have done
 As it's only for fun
 That I write in this jingling way
 But if you cou'd talk
 As well as you walk
 I'd tell my dear boy what to say.⁸²

Ryland then experiences what many who have mourned and then learned to laugh again after mourning experience: guilt. On 1 December 1788, 'the second return of my ever dear Betsy's Birth day after her Glorification',⁸³ he writes:

Have I forgot her? – Judge me O her God!
 I court the search of thine impartial Eye;
 Thine eye which pierces hell's profound abode,
 And all the earth surveys, & all the sky.⁸⁴

For the rest of the poem, Ryland returns to a previous theme: God's sovereignty in Betsy's death. In this particular one, however, he leans most heavily on God's activity in taking Betsy but is also able to see how God had sustained him through 'two years of worse than solitary Grief'.⁸⁵

Were I not conscious Thy unerring will
 Had from my bosom torn that saint away,
 Rivers of tears by night my bed wou'd fill,
 And groans incessant wear out every day.

Thou Lord has done it – therefore I forbear,
 Yes, therefore only, I my grief repress;
 Else shou'd I be abandon'd to despair,
 For sure my loss thou only canst redress.⁸⁶

While he still could describe Betsy as an 'earthly boon' he prized like no other,⁸⁷ this poem also features the first mention of his second wife, Frances Barrett. This first reference to the woman who would be his wife for thirty

⁸² Ryland, 'Poems', Vol. 2, 79.

⁸³ Ryland, 'Poems', Vol. 2, 81.

⁸⁴ Ryland, 'Poems', Vol. 2, 81.

⁸⁵ Ryland, 'Poems', Vol. 2, 82.

⁸⁶ Ryland, 'Poems', Vol. 2, 81.

⁸⁷ Ryland, 'Poems', Vol. 2, 81.

six years is somewhat less impassioned than his references to Betsy.⁸⁸ He writes of Frances:

Yes, she has left a female friend behind
 Who lov'd her much, was much by her belov'd,⁸⁹
 Of gentle Manners, & a kindred Mind,
 A tender ♥, & piety approv'd.

Grant me that friend to soothe Life's later Woes
 And teach our infant Babe a Savior's Love
 Till with my Betsy's Clay shall mine repose
 And I shall join her in the Realms above.⁹⁰

The poems of deep-rooted grief end with this one. Ryland and Frances Barrett were married on 18 June 1789, and it would seem that his prayer for comfort from Frances was answered positively. Ryland composed several poems with no references to Betsy, and the poems he did write were more joyful than those before. For example, on 31 July 1790, Ryland wrote a poem based on Psalm 45, on which he had preached several times around that time.⁹¹ He writes:

Let us sing the King Melsiah,
 King of Righteousness & Peace;
 Hail him all his happy Subjects,
 Never let his praises cease:
 Ever hail him,
 Never let his praises cease.

How transcendent are thy Glories!
 Fairer than the Sons of Men!
 While thy blessed Mediation
 Brings us back to God again

⁸⁸ Newton gives Ryland some intriguing advice around this time, saying, 'As matters seem to have gone too far for receding with honour and propriety, and as you mean to marry in the Lord, I think you may trust him to give you such feelings as may suffice to make your relation comfortable' (John Newton, 'Letter to John Ryland Jr', 20 January 1789, in Gordon, *Wise Counsel*, p. 214). It would seem as though Ryland was having second thoughts about his marriage to Frances.

⁸⁹ Betsy and Frances were indeed friends before Betsy's death. Ryland makes reference to this in several poems. In one written from the perspective of John Tyler, he writes:

My own dear Mother's friend
 Who lov'd her here below
 And gladly will attend
 To nurse & teach me now (Ryland, 'Poems', Vol. 2, 90).

In her diary, Frances records her own thoughts on Betsy: 'The thought of presiding in the place of one I so dearly loved, and whose temper and conduct was so truly amiable, fills my heart with a thousand anxieties. No, I shall never forget the sweetness of her love and esteem! My hope is in God, otherwise the charge and care of her dear Infant, would occasion still greater concern. May the recollection of her kindness, affection, and sympathy, not only soften every care, but animate me to the discharge of duties however difficult with all fidelity' (Frances Barrett Ryland, *Spiritual Journal of MRS Ryland (1789-1806)*, Bristol Baptist College Archives, 14 June 1789).

⁹⁰ Ryland, 'Poems', Vol. 2, 81-83.

⁹¹ Ryland, 'Text Book', 22 July and 1 August 1790, Northamptonshire Record Office.

Blest Redeemer
How we triumph in thy reign!⁹²

Theological poems such as this begin to be found once again in Ryland's book, mixed with more personal poems to his wife, children, and grandchildren.⁹³ The references to Betsy slowly fade away. Ryland moves on, but he never forgot Betsy, the wife and love of his youth, for even decades after his death, in poems written to his second wife, Betsy makes the occasional appearance. Writing to Frances, his 'dear Wife',⁹⁴ in April 1808, Ryland mentions Betsy:

Her once you lov'd as well as I,
And now she waits, above the sky,
Our entrance there to greet;
In a few years before the throne,
In realms where sorrow is unknown
We shall her spirit meet.⁹⁵

Conclusion

It is not uncommon to find Calvinistic writers such as Ryland referring to the necessity of 'kissing the rod' which struck them.⁹⁶ By this they mean that they ought to understand the hand of God in their afflictions and accept it as for their good. Ryland uses a form of it in the funeral sermon for his friend William Guy, telling the congregation, 'Be humbled then under the rod of your heavenly Father, and enquire, Was there not a cause for this stroke?'⁹⁷ He would later exhort another congregation at a funeral service with these words:

⁹² Ryland, 'Poems', Vol. 2, 92. This poem was published under the pen name "R." as 'Success to the Arms of Messiah', *Evangelical Magazine* 1 (1793), 44. It has since been put to use as a hymn, appearing in numerous hymnals in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, such as *Missionary Hymns, Composed and Selected for the Public Services at the Annual Meetings of the Missionary Society, in London* (London: W. Arding, 1814), number 23; *The Hymnary: For Use in Baptist Churches* (Whitby, Ontario: Ryerson Press, 1936), number 10; *Hymns of Hope: Founded on the Psalms and the New Covenant* (London: Elliot Stock, 1879), number 328; *Baptist Praise and Worship* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), number 631.

⁹³ Ryland had three daughters, Elizabeth Barrett Ryland, Frances Barrett Ryland, and Mary Ryland. He also had another son, Jonathan Edwards Ryland. Curiously, no poems survive that were written to Jonathan Edwards Ryland.

⁹⁴ Ryland, 'Poems', Vol. 1, 36.

⁹⁵ Ryland, 'Poems', Vol. 1, 36-37.

⁹⁶ See Matthew Henry, *An Exposition of the Old Testament* (4 vols; Edinburgh: C. Wright, 1758), p. 510; John Bunyan, *Seasonable Counsel: Or, Advice to Sufferers* (London: Benjamin Alsop, 1684), p. 62; John Newton, *The Christian Correspondent; or a Series of Religious Letters* (Hull: George Prince, 1790), p. 158; and James Hervey, *Letters from the Late Reverend James Hervey, A.M., Rector of Weston Flavel to the Right Honourable Lady Frances Shirley* (London: John Rivington, 1782), p. 273. The phrase was not limited to Calvinist or even religious literature. Shakespeare used it in *Richard II*, 5.1.32.

⁹⁷ John Ryland, *Seasonable Hints to a Bereaved Church; and the Blessedness of the Dead, Who Die in the Lord* (Northampton: T. Dicey, 1783), p. 21.

To consider the Hand of God in our Afflictions is the Way to calm our Minds, which are too ready to fret at Instruments & 2^d Causes, & overlook the first. By this we often miss the Benefit of Afflict^s. even when we do not directly fret ag^t. God himself.⁹⁸

What Ryland's poems show is that giving these kinds of exhortations is somewhat easier than obeying them. The calming of the mind and realising the benefits of affliction, of which Ryland wrote, do not happen overnight and may, in fact, come only after a long struggle. The poems show that the men whose well-edited books and sermons historians study sometimes walked with a spiritual and psychological limp.

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⁹⁸ John Ryland, 'Sermon Notes: Job 1:21', Original Manuscript Sermons: Old Testament, Vol. 1, Bristol Baptist College Archives.